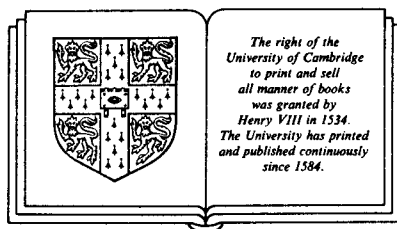


BRITAIN, POLAND AND THE EASTERN FRONT, 1939

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Introduction

In 1968 the Public Records Office made available to historians British Cabinet papers relating to the years 1938 and 1939. This decision had renewed the debate on the extent of British responsibility for allowing Hitler to pursue his revisionist and aggressive policies in Europe. It has been asserted that the degree of British complicity, the logical consequences of appeasement, could be ascertained through the study of contemporary documents. The historical analysis of British involvement in the break up of Czechoslovakia has notably benefited from this development. It is therefore surprising to note that this has not been matched by an equally detailed analysis of the few months preceding the outbreak of the war; in particular the period from March till September 1939.

The assumption of an undertaking to aid Poland against German aggression on the 31 March has traditionally been seen as signalling a break in the foreign policy hitherto pursued by the British government. It is presumed, therefore, that the period from the end of March to the outbreak of the war is one of few new initiatives, in any case none which would contradict the assertion that in the closing days of March Britain had made a definite commitment to fight Germany.¹ Thus the British guarantee to Poland is frequently viewed in apocalyptic terms. In some interpretations it is portrayed as a supreme folly, a gesture that constituted a gauntlet thrown down to Hitler and one which he picked up at a time when Britain was unprepared for war.² By others, it is seen as a point at which Britain decided to oppose Germany and forge a new policy of challenging Hitler by offering a guarantee to a country which, it was known, would be the next object of German revisionism.³

In both these interpretations of Britain's reactions to German aggression in Central and Eastern Europe in 1938 and 1939, the British guarantee to Poland is seen through the prism of German actions in Europe, overlooking the traditional and long-term policy of successive British governments of disengagement from the affairs of Central and Eastern Europe. The latter perspective reveals the more complex origins of British appeasement as well as casting a more revealing light on Britain's inability to build up successfully an eastern front against Germany during the period from March to September 1939.

Throughout the First World War British politicians and the Foreign Office were deeply apprehensive of the consequences of the break up of the old empires, primarily the Austro-Hungarian, but also the Russian and the Ottoman Empires. The replacement of existing, however unstable, entities was going to pose new and unknown problems. Thus little support was given initially to Polish and Czechoslovak claims for support for their aspirations from the Entente powers. The collapse of the Russian partner precipitated new attitudes. Moreover, the Central Power's attempt to obtain Polish support, by recognising the right of the Poles to an independent state, forced the British and French to formulate new policies.⁴ Britain's main concern was the future fate of Germany, and subsequently also that of Russia. In the first case Britain opposed French schemes for weakening Germany by imposing a punitive peace. In the case of Russia, Britain's involvement in the Civil War was badly planned and half-hearted, resulting in troops being committed to the Russian war but, simultaneously, a reluctance to support Polish schemes for a war against the Bolsheviks.⁵ To Poland the consequence of that attitude was that Britain remained opposed to the incorporation of Danzig and Upper Silesia into Poland.⁶ But the subsequent Polish-Russian war of 1919-20 and the Polish-Czechoslovak crisis over Teschen appeared to substantiate fully Lloyd George's apprehensions that the new states would be the source of instability in that region.

It was France which, ostensibly, benefited from the creation of the new states in Central Eastern Europe. However, the importance of the Franco-Polish Alliance of 1921 and the Czechoslovak-French Alliance of 1924 should not be overestimated. Polish-Czechoslovak hostility retained its full potency during the whole of the inter-war period and prevented France from making any diplomatic use of her

agreements with both countries, whether to form an anti-German bloc or to conciliate potential Danubian conflicts.⁷

The British initiative in negotiating the Locarno Pact confirmed all that was apparent in British foreign policy towards Germany and Central and Eastern Europe as well as leading to the weakening of France's influence east of Germany. The substance of the Locarno treaties was such that Britain and France implicitly let Germany know that they accepted the possibility of the revision of Germany's eastern frontier while at the same time underlining the inviolability of her borders in the west.⁸

Whereas it is difficult to perceive any long-term British political plans towards Central Eastern Europe, an analysis of economic contacts is more revealing. In the first half of 1919 Britain lent her support to schemes for the creation of independent Baltic States. The Polish claim to the Baltic coast and region as areas of her exclusive interest were seen as going counter to British plans for increasing trade with those countries and subsequently also with the Soviet Union.⁹ On a general level, Britain opposed any power trying to monopolise trade with the Successor States. But during the 1930s these countries' attempts to restrict their trade with Germany and expand it with Britain evoked little response from the latter.

The onset of the world depression necessitated a revision of economic priorities. At the Ottawa conference in July 1932 Britain committed herself to trade with the imperial territories. The agricultural countries of Central Eastern Europe, most notably the Baltic States and Poland, were affected adversely by this decision.¹⁰ To the North Eastern European countries, Britain remained the most important market for their agricultural produce, a position which was altered by Germany's aggressive economic policy after 1934. Their preference for trading with Britain was nevertheless not considered to be of sufficient economic importance by the British Treasury and the Board of Trade. That attitude was maintained steadfastly in spite of the Foreign Office's disquiet at the expansion of Germany's political influence, which came in the wake of the spread of her economic dominance.

In 1936 the Foreign Office's urgings that clearance payments schemes should be established with Central East European states was rejected on the grounds that it conflicted with the government's determination not to make special arrangements with that region. This decision was aimed at protecting British agriculture.¹¹ The

Foreign Office did recognise that Britain was thus casting aside an opportunity to realise the political capital of those countries' apprehensions at their growing economic dependence on trade with Germany. But, both in political and economic terms, trade with Poland and the Baltic States was of little consequence to Britain. German expansion eastwards, be it economic or even political, was not viewed as undesirable, although British politicians had earlier strongly objected to the states east of Germany becoming an area of exclusive French influence.

Militarily too, Britain considered Central Eastern Europe to be of no direct significance. When the military activities of the First World War had ceased in Europe, British troops remained in various trouble spots of the empire and, in addition, Britain acquired new areas which brought with them the need for policing. This was particularly the case in Palestine. Britain's military resources remained severely stretched during the inter-war period and the defence of Europe was the first casualty of any plans for reducing or rescheduling expenditure on military matters.¹² Notwithstanding the Treasury's determination to control and limit spending on troops for the Continent, there also existed amongst British military chiefs a general dislike of the French and a consequent reluctance to plan joint action in Europe.¹³ This sentiment prevailed throughout the 1920s and 1930s.

During discussions in December 1937 the Cabinet reaffirmed its acceptance of the primary role of the army as being the defence of the empire. Thomas Inskip, Minister for the Co-ordination of Defence, based his assumptions on Hore-Belisha's earlier statement that 'France no longer looked to Britain, in the event of war, to supply an expeditionary force on the scale hitherto proposed'.¹⁴ Thus, even on the eve of German action in Austria, and in the full knowledge of Germany's well publicised claim to the defence of Sudeten Germans, the British government was proceeding with the decrease of military commitments to the Continent. In any event, the only role envisaged for the British army on the Continent was the defence of Belgium, Holland and the northern coast of France. British unwillingness to send any troops to Central Eastern Europe or naval units to the Baltic or Black Seas was a foregone conclusion. In the absence of political commitments east of Germany, no plans were made for a reappraisal of this position throughout the inter-war period.

Historians studying the British government's reaction to the Austrian crisis of 1938 agree that developments there were considered to have been outside the scope of the mainstream of British foreign policy considerations. In his book *The Chamberlain Cabinet*, Ian Colvin notes that the annexation of Austria was an event with which the British Cabinet came to terms with admirable ease. German actions were considered to have been unnecessarily provocative and likely to threaten peace in Europe, but in essence, it was still hoped to continue with the long-term aim of reaching a colonial settlement with Germany, a plan which had earlier been put to the German government by the British.¹⁵

The Austrian crisis immediately brought to the fore the question of Czechoslovakia, a subject the British Cabinet proceeded to debate on the day following the Anschluss. Two issues preoccupied the minds of the British ministers. The most important was the fear lest France make a hasty decision to honour her obligation to Czechoslovakia and then draw Britain into a European war. The second concern was that of how to persuade the Czechs to yield to the German demand for the incorporation of the Sudeten Germans into Germany. On 14 March 1938 Chamberlain, addressing the Committee for Foreign Policy, asserted that he did not believe 'the assumption that when Germany had secured the hegemony of Central Europe, she would then pick a quarrel with ourselves'.¹⁶ Having persuaded the French government of Chautemps to distance itself from Czechoslovakia Britain took the reins into her own hands. Pressure was to be put on Czechoslovakia to show herself reasonable in the face of German demands. Keith Middlemas states in his book *Diplomacy of Illusion* that by the summer of 1938, the question was not that of whether to defend Czechoslovakia or not, but that of whether 'to warn Hitler off or to go to the extreme lengths of concession'.¹⁷

Both these crises and the British government's response illustrate the point stated earlier, that the British government was indifferent to the fate of Central Eastern Europe. A notable feature of both these crises is the fact that the merits of Germany's claims were on the whole not considered, nor was the legitimacy of Germany's actions.

But it was not a feeling of fatalism which caused British politicians to display indifference to the fate of Austria and Czechoslovakia. The main motive for British indifference to the consequences of German revisionism was the recognition of the fact that German

actions did not threaten British interests. Chamberlain's pre-occupation remained a general European and global settlement with Germany, in which case he was prepared to overlook the fate of minor European states as well as long-term French interests.

At the same time, the conclusion of an Anglo-Italian Agreement was high on the list of British foreign policy priorities. Italian acquiescence to the Anschluss did surprise British politicians. But in the absence of any major difference of opinion between the British and Italians over Austria, the Spanish Civil War remained the only live obstacle to, what British politicians hoped would become, good relations between the two Mediterranean powers, Britain and Italy.

Still one has to recognise that Britain's sudden involvement in German-Czechoslovak negotiations over the fate of the Sudeten Germans was a move that clearly went counter to traditional British policy not merely in Europe but particularly in Central Eastern Europe. Amongst a number of theories put forward by historians, two suggest opposing explanations. One by Simon Newman concentrates predominantly on the Munich conference and concludes on the granting of the guarantee to Poland. Simon Newman sees the British initiative in setting up the Munich conference as an attempt to stem German expansion eastwards. Concentrating on a study of economic developments, he concludes that the British initiative in German-Czechoslovak relations was the beginning of the turn in the British attitude towards German revisionism. According to Newman, Chamberlain tried to halt German aggression and since September 1938 sought means of cautioning Germany against continuing aggressive moves. This was to be achieved partly through the use of economic contracts and, when these failed, by a direct warning to Germany over the case of Poland in March 1939.¹⁸ The British commitment to Poland is thus seen in the new light as a final notice, where economic gestures had failed to deter Germany. Newman suggests, therefore, that during the period October 1938-March 1939 Britain sought means of defending Central East European states against German aggression.

The other theory on British-German relations in the 1930s is suggested by Andrew Crozier. In his article on the subject Crozier concentrates his attention on the period preceding the Munich conference. The core of his theory is that in 1936 the British Cabinet authorised a new, more systematic approach to Germany. Aban-

doning the previously piecemeal treatment of German actions which challenged the Versailles Treaty, it was decided to take the lead in initiating a review of German grievances in respect of the postwar settlement.¹⁹ Thus a comprehensive list of aims was presented by Eden according to which the Locarno Treaty was to be abandoned in favour of a more general arms limitation agreement. Furthermore, Germany's economic and political interest in Central and Eastern Europe would be recognised. According to Crozier, Britain was thus taking the initiative and hoping to control German revisionism.

The colonial question promised to be a good starting point for this British programme. Unfortunately, Germany did not respond to these approaches and proceeded with the Anschluss, thus presenting Britain, as the rest of Europe, with a *fait accompli*. Crozier thus sees the Munich agreement as Britain's last attempt at setting the pace and thus controlling German expansion, and as, in effect, a miscarriage of that policy. He views the Munich conference not as an isolated incident but, 'an aspect of a much wider whole, namely, the policy of trying to achieve a European and general settlement'.²⁰

A variation of this theory of British actions preceding the Munich conference is also suggested by Michael Newman.²¹ Newman asserts that Britain had, throughout the inter-war period, refused to take an active interest in the minutiae of Central and Eastern European politics. In the British view, the region's affairs only were of indirect importance to Great Britain. Michael Newman sees Britain as aiming exclusively for a four power detente including Britain, France, Germany and Italy, as the sole purpose of her European policy. If small power rivalries in the Danubian Basin were likely to impede this detente they should be resolved forthwith in order to facilitate the major aim of harmony between the four big European powers.²² Newman states that the advent of the Nazi government and its obvious aggressive intentions did not alter this basic principle of British foreign policy towards Central Europe. He asserts that:

Since the goal of four power agreements, completed with passive pragmatism in Central Europe, had been adopted because it apparently served Britain's world interests, there would inevitably be extremely powerful forces in favour of retaining this policy unless it could be proved that Nazi aggressiveness in Central Europe necessarily threatened Britain's major interests elsewhere. In fact these forces maintained their dominance throughout the period.²³

Finally, Michael Newman concludes by showing that German aggression towards Czechoslovakia, though considered undesirable, was never seen as requiring a major reappraisal of British goals towards Germany.

Both Andrew Crozier and Michael Newman lay great stress on the continuity of British foreign policy primarily towards Germany and also, as a result of that, towards the victims of German aggression. Michael Newman succinctly summarises this attitude by suggesting that Britain 'was not prepared to modify the traditional supposition that Central Europe was an area of minor importance unless and until it was absolutely convinced that Nazi expansion there would preface general expansion'.²⁴

In any event, the period from October 1938 until March 1939 was one of relative stability. Germany's immediate demands towards Czechoslovakia appeared to have been dealt with and no new areas of potential conflict appeared imminent. But in the same way that the Anschluss did not satiate Hitler's appetite, so the Munich agreement did not resolve the issue of German revisionism. Indeed, the whole Czechoslovak crisis gave proof of Hitler's determination to seek redress of all remaining outstanding German territorial grievances. Furthermore, it exhibited his ruthlessness in the pursuit of this aim. Not surprisingly, most European statesmen and politicians sought to anticipate Hitler's next move.

Outstanding claims to Polish territory, namely to the Free City of Danzig, came once more to the forefront of attention in the autumn of 1938. Indeed, the whole of Polish-German relations were closely observed, as most European politicians envisaged a number of possible conflicts between the two. Polish complicity in the dismemberment of Czechoslovakia, while removing the Polish-Czechoslovak dispute over the Teschen region from the list of dangerous issues, immediately gave rise to a new potential Polish-German conflict over the Czech region of Bohumin, Frydek and Freistat. In addition, it was generally suspected that Germany was supporting Ukrainian irredentism, which was, amongst others, also directed against Poland.

But at that time Poland was not viewed with sympathy. Her policy of following an independent and what appeared at times to be a policy of extreme opportunism, endeared her to none of the other European powers. Both the French and the British realised that

Poland would not allow herself to be directed to the extent that Czechoslovakia had. The haughty and abrasive personality of Poland's Minister for Foreign Affairs, Colonel Joseph Beck, made him an unpopular figure in the League of Nations, in France and in Britain. In the autumn of 1938, although anticipating the possible development of a conflict between Germany and Poland, no British politician was prepared to champion the case of Poland, even if Britain were determined to oppose Germany.

Political developments in Central Eastern Europe throughout the inter-war period vindicated previous British feelings of disquiet and distaste at having to deal with the consequences of instability in that part of Europe. Poland, her internal and foreign policies, all provided an adequate rationale and excuse for disinterest in the squabbles of the Successor States. J. Maynard Keynes' comment on Poland as 'an economic impossibility with no industry but Jew-baiting'²⁵ exquisitely sarcastic as it is, did, to all intents and purposes, reflect the attitude of Liberal, Labour and particularly Conservative party circles.

Within one year of having obtained independence, Poland had embarked on a policy of aggression against the newly-established Bolshevik state. While Britain had made known her disapproval of Polish claims to the extension of the Polish border in the east beyond the Curzon line, the outbreak of the Polish-Russian war in 1920, drew Britain back into arbitration in that region. But what left a lasting impression in the minds of the French and British politicians was the manner in which the Polish government behaved when it first appealed for arbitration as a Polish defeat appeared to be imminent and then flouted the advice given when their strategic position improved. During the Spa conference in July 1920 Polish-Russian hostilities were discussed and, on British insistence, an attempt was made to commit Poland to a major border settlement.²⁶ But when in August 1920 Poland restarted a successful counter-offensive against the Bolsheviks, earlier British advice was scorned. By October, the Piłsudski government was once more letting it be known that Poland considered not merely Lithuania but also Estonia and Finland as areas of legitimate Polish interest. In October 1920 General Zeligowski occupied Vilnius in direct contravention of the British-French decision that it should belong to Lithuania. Though ostensibly this action had not been authorised by the Polish government,

in November the Polish Sejm approved the incorporation of the town and district into Poland, thus demonstrating that British advice and wishes would be ignored.

Soon after winning the war against the Bolsheviks, the Poles displayed a remarkable ability to ignore the national aspirations of the Lithuanian and Ukrainian population and proceeded to get involved in an acrimonious quarrel with their southern neighbour, Czechoslovakia. The Polish–Czechoslovak dispute over the Teschen region originated in the Czechoslovak occupation of the area in January 1919. An additional factor was the French support of Czechoslovakia which aimed at making the latter a pivotal point of French influence in Central Europe. Czechoslovakia was the only industrialised state in that region and it was considered advantageous by the French to support the development of Czechoslovak coal mining, in particular that of the rich coking coal, as well as steel production.²⁷ The result was that Polish–Czechoslovak relations remained strained throughout the inter-war period. Polish support for Slovak independence movements was reciprocated by Czechoslovak aid to Ukrainian nationalist organisations.

During the 1920s and 1930s Polish military leaders presumed that the next major war in which Poland would be involved, would be one with the Soviet Union. The Soviet Union was viewed as Poland's major enemy and, until late 1938, the only aggressor against whom military plans had been prepared. The historical enmity existing between the two states was further encouraged by internal policy considerations. Political restrictions and a nationalist policy pursued by successive Polish governments against internal political opponents and national minorities tended to be justified by a need for vigilance. Anti-communism and anti-Semitism became the most obvious examples of these tendencies. Aspirations to the status of a major European power served to draw public attention away from economic problems and the suppression of democratic rights and focussed it on imperial claims and calls for an anti-Bolshevik crusade, which would extend Polish borders from the Baltic to the Black Sea.²⁸ As in the case of Czechoslovakia, Poland's relations with the Soviet Union remained bad throughout the inter-war period and only on a few occasions appeared to rise above the indifferent. In July 1932 Poland signed with the Soviet Union a Pact of Non-Aggression, a move motivated by the disquiet at the policies of the other major European powers, notably Britain and France, rather

than a change of attitude towards the Soviet Union. A deterioration in Polish–German relations had accentuated Poland's isolation and was an added impetus for the Polish government to respond favourably to approaches made by Maxim Litvinof, Soviet People's Commissar for Foreign Affairs, in the autumn of 1931.²⁹

The 'Stresemann period', which is a phrase used to describe the *rapprochement* which characterised Anglo-French relations with Germany during the period 1925–9 placed Poland in a particularly weak position. The successful negotiations pursued by these powers caused France to temporarily eschew her eastern allies. France's attitude towards the Central East European states depended to a very large extent on the state of relations existing at the time between France and Britain on the one hand, and France and Germany on the other. French politicians tended to attach less significance to relations with Poland and Czechoslovakia in direct proportion to the improvement of relations with Britain and Germany. These changes of emphasis in France's foreign policy tended to reverberate strongly in Central Eastern Europe. Poland and Czechoslovakia both presumed that the Locarno Treaty opened the door to German revisionism eastwards in particular.³⁰ The result was that Poland's dictator Piłsudski initiated efforts to improve relations with Germany. Hitler proved himself to be more responsive to these moves than was Stresemann and in January 1934 Poland and Germany signed a Pact of Non-Aggression.

Contemporary commentators and subsequent historians tended to castigate Poland for having negotiated with Germany in 1934, but at the time the treaty appeared to be a very advantageous one to Poland. The Poles had concluded that France, under what was presumed to be British tutelage, was a very unreliable partner. Poland's standing in Europe appeared to be weakening. The entry of Germany into the League of Nations in 1926 and the success of Stresemann's policies accentuated Poland's weakness as she did not have a strong European partner to support her in her dealings with Germany. At the same time the Soviet Union's status in Europe appeared to be improving. In spite of their initial reluctance to perceive the Bolshevik state as anything but a transient phenomenon, both France and Britain in due course established political relations with it and Poland was given little encouragement in her anti-Soviet designs. In considering the advantages to be gained from improving Poland's relations with Germany, Piłsudski's government also took

into account Poland's economic position. Foreign capital appeared to have been reluctant to invest in a country likely to be the object of German aggression. Poland's difficulties during the depression were increased by the flight of short-term capital and the government's inability to obtain further loans. It has therefore been suggested that the Polish government sought detente with Germany in the 1930s in order to expand Polish-German trade as well as to facilitate negotiations in international markets.³¹

In Poland the Polish-German agreement was seen as a success confirming Poland's big power status in Europe. Immediate benefits were gained from the revival of international trade and the decrease of tension in the Free City of Danzig. It has also been suggested that Pilsudski hoped that the agreement would lead to future joint plans for a war against the Soviet Union and the restoration of eighteenth-century Polish borders.³² Thus in 1934, Poland made the fundamental assumption of German non-belligerence. This was a view that was momentous in its implications, and as a consequence of which Polish foreign policy tended towards approving German revisionist claims in Central Eastern Europe without securing for Poland compensation either in strategic or political terms.

Poland's distrust of the French was accentuated by a belief that France was increasingly succumbing to British influence. In addition to experiencing British opposition to Polish territorial claims during the Versailles conference, the Poles had dealings with the British over the Free City of Danzig. Britain was one of the members of the League Commission on Danzig and as Rapporteurs the British were seen as espousing the German side.

The case of Danzig was a complex one. The compromise solution of it becoming a Free City, with its own elected governing body, constitution and currency but remaining as part of Poland's customs arrangement was one which satisfied neither the Poles nor the Germans. The League of Nations guaranteed the status of the Free City but was clearly not in a position to protect it. The League High Commissioner in the city was appointed to act as mediator between the Polish government and the Senate and thus incurred the hostility of the Poles who saw him as defending German rights. The situation was rendered more difficult when, in May 1933, the National Socialists won a majority in the Senate and the city authorities became unequivocally committed to representing Hitler's aims in the city.³³ Thus Danzig and the commitment to its status became an

embarrassment to the British, a feeling they neither denied nor concealed.

The protection of the status of the Free City was the only obligation which Britain retained in Central Eastern Europe, albeit an indirect one, but one which she persistently tried to dispose of throughout the 1930s. Eden's scheme for a comprehensive settlement with Germany, which was approved in 1936 and which would have included the question of colonies and the inclusion of all Germans in Germany, had failed.³⁴ But British politicians remained consistent in letting Hitler know that they sought an opportunity to be relieved of the League obligations in the Free City. During a visit to the Berlin Hunting Exhibition, November 1937 Halifax restated Britain's disinterest in Eastern Europe. On assuming the post of Secretary for Foreign Affairs, Halifax tried to encourage the Poles to allow the League to withdraw from Danzig. Thus on 24 May 1938, the League Commissioner, Professor Carl Burckhardt, reported to Marian Chodacki, the Polish Commissioner, that Halifax had stated that if the Senate would introduce para-Nuremberg race law, the League would no longer wish to remain in the city. Burckhardt also repeated that he felt that the French were increasingly toeing the British line on Danzig.³⁵ In his subsequent report, Chodacki recorded that Burckhardt had confirmed his sense 'that the British side was growing impatient with the state of affairs in Danzig as this prejudiced Britain's talks with the Reich and created a unpleasant atmosphere in the House of Commons, while of course, the Danzig issue was a matter of total indifference to the British'.³⁶

Reporting on the visit of the Danzig Gauleiter, Forster, to Britain in July 1938, the Polish Embassy in London was able to paint a better picture of the British government's attitude towards the issue. Sir Alexander Cadogan, the Permanent Under-Secretary of State at the Foreign Office, was quoted as assuring the Poles that he had warned Forster against taking any illegal action to change the status of the city. But Stevenson of the League Department of the Foreign Office was less restrained and admitted that in his conversation with Forster 'he took the opportunity to tell him that the British government would view with pleasure the possibility of Poland and Germany reaching an agreement over Danzig'. Stevenson's confidences led the Poles to assume that what had really been implied to Forster was that as long as the Senate retained a cloak of legality, the British would not object.³⁷ Thus British, but also French, attitudes

towards Poland's rights in the Free City were being analysed by the Poles not in isolation, but in relation to the whole of French and British policies towards Poland. The Poles nurtured a chronic suspicion that Danzig was to be a mere pawn which the democracies were prepared to concede to Germany in a major European game.³⁸

The man whose name was associated with Poland's claims to big powers status in Europe is Colonel Joseph Beck, who had been the Polish Minister for Foreign Affairs since November 1932. His main aim was to assert Polish independence between her two big neighbours, which he claimed to be maintaining by establishing equally good, though distant, relations with both the Soviet Union and Germany.

Since 1931 the Poles had diligently pursued the Third Europe policy. This was ostensibly a policy of building a bloc of states independent of big power tutelage with Poland as the rallying point for the smaller states of Central and South Eastern Europe. At its most grandiose the plan was to unite the states of the Baltic and the Balkans together. At its more modest it meant establishing some coherent policy between the Baltic States, Poland, Hungary, Rumania and Yugoslavia. Piłsudski and later Beck tried to emphasise the non-ideological nature of the proposal but the idea had clear political connotations. There was no natural political unity of interest amongst the states of Central and South Eastern Europe. They were disunited by old and more recent grievances. Polish-Lithuanian enmity and Rumanian and Yugoslav apprehensions about Hungary were too strong to be overcome. Anti-communism and, to a certain extent, anxiety about big power politics could be the only, albeit at times a very tenuous, unifying ideology.³⁹

Although the aim of Poland's foreign policy initiative was to eliminate conflicts in Central and South Eastern Europe, the complex hostilities in the region proved to be insurmountable. Thus Poland had to consider how to satisfy both Hungarian and Rumanian revisionist aims. The break up of Czechoslovakia appeared to offer this opportunity. But neither Yugoslavia nor Rumania were willing to encourage Hungarian revisionism. While not prepared to defend Czechoslovakia they most certainly did not want to see Hungary return to a position of importance.⁴⁰ In addition, when trying to set the pace of territorial readjustments in Central and South Eastern Europe, Poland was coming into conflict with German intentions.

Poland hoped to strengthen her position by setting the pace of a new territorial division at the expense of Czechoslovakia. Ironically that very process could only take place in the wake of German aggressive demands towards Czechoslovakia. Thus Beck hoped to counteract the spread of German political influence in Central and South Eastern Europe by forging unity between the states of that region. But in pursuing this very policy Poland was having to co-operate with Germany and thus herself became dependent on German support.

The desire to benefit from any German attack on Czechoslovakia was openly discussed by Poland's rulers in early 1938. Jan Szembek, the Deputy Minister for Foreign Affairs, records a conversation he witnessed between the Minister for Defence, Marshal Śmigły-Rydz, and the President, Sławoj-Skłodowski, on 12 March 1938. Assuming that neither Britain nor France were likely to defend Czechoslovakia Śmigły-Rydz stressed that Poland should ensure that her neutrality in relation to Germany's proposed action in Czechoslovakia should be offered only at a price, in this case 'tangible benefits in Danzig'.⁴¹ Poland's co-operation with Germany in the Czechoslovak crisis had become clearly defined after the tension of May 1938.

According to Marian Wojciechowski, Beck had decided in May that the western democracies and the Soviet Union were likely to remain passive in the face of German aggression. Therefore, he felt safe in making a decision to co-operate with Germany fully, but only on the assumption that Germany would take the initiative.⁴² Thus, while still maintaining that Poland was not directly involved in the crisis, it became necessary for the Poles to define their objectives. Joseph Lipski, the Polish Ambassador to Berlin, believed that he had received a veiled invitation from the Nazi leaders to present Polish demands during two discussions he had had with Goering in August. The first took place on 11 August and the second, more precise in its content, on 24 August.

During the first conversation, Goering suggested that the moment was opportune for discussing 'the possibility of Polish-German *rapprochement* in certain fields'.⁴³ During the subsequent meeting Lipski, who had in the meantime received detailed instructions from Warsaw, was quite specific as to what Poland sought as a price for co-operation with Germany.⁴⁴ Hinting heavily that 'we also do not believe the present Czech creation can exist any longer' Lipski defined Poland's aims towards Czechoslovakia's territory as the granting of autonomy to Slovakia and the division of the district of